

Officials: Meth, other crimes linked

Gentry Braswell

Sierra Vista Herald

November 14, 2007

SIERRA VISTA — Fraud, identity theft, property crime and child neglect all have one thing in common: their correlation to the methamphetamine epidemic.

This dire fact was discussed at a crime and fraud prevention forum Tuesday night at Buena High School, sponsored by the Arizona Attorney General's Office, and attended by representatives from U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords' Sierra Vista office, Southern Arizona Legal Aid, SouthEastern Arizona Governments Organization and the Better Business Bureau's Sierra Vista office. About 40 people attended.



Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard listens during Tuesday's crime forum at Buena High School. (Mark Levy-Herald/Review)

Attorney General Terry Goddard, Cochise County Sheriff Larry Dever, Sierra Vista Police Department Chief Ken Kimmel and Cochise County Attorney Ed Rheinheimer spoke about crime in Southeastern Arizona and statewide as it relates to community at the event.

The multiple correlations with methamphetamine use and preventative fraud education were the two main discussion points.

Goddard said the key to preventing people from becoming a victim to fraud involves educating the public.

"If we can harden the target, if we can make sure the individuals out there know the dangers," he said.

Many resources for fraud prevention and survival can be found at the Arizona Attorney General Office's Web site at www.azag.gov.

Kimmel thanked Goddard's office for hard-copy and Web-based resources the city Police Department is able to use to help Sierra Vista residents understand the issue.

The police chief said the most important way to not become a victim of fraud is to protect one's self.

"If you make yourself easy prey for these criminals, they will make you a victim if they can," Kimmel said. "There are so many scams available out there, we couldn't ever cover them all tonight."

The consensus among police and prosecutors is that links between people high on methamphetamine or selling amphetamine and property crime, child abuse and fraud are solid.

Fraud, identity theft and methamphetamine production and distribution are proliferating throughout the United States, and trends in Cochise County are no exception.

Dever said the local problems are aggravated by "the additional burden of dealing with a wide-open border."

That burden falls on the local criminal justice system and the taxpayers who support it, Dever said.

A drug task force in Cochise County established in 1987 originally dealt with border interdiction before the federal border enforcement presence was as pronounced as it is now.

About 3 1/2 years ago, the task force was retooled to focus more specifically on the meth epidemic and meth trade as it pertains to Cochise County, Dever said.

Rheinheimer began in 1992 working with the drug task force, which previously concentrated on the transport of marijuana into the United States and used pot

busts to trace contraband origins back to the Mexican drug cartel from which it came.

The task force now concentrates more on the meth trade, which has changed the operations and methods of the task force, Rheinheimer said.

Federal dollars designated for enforcement and prosecution in High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas, such as Cochise County, via the task force, have allowed the use of special prosecutors, Rheinheimer said.

But the switch of the main black-market international import from marijuana to methamphetamine has changed the game for the worse, from the perspective of the local criminal justice system, Rheinheimer said.

Prosecution statistics for meth trafficking leave a lot to be desired, he said.

Regarding the international meth trade that affects Arizona and Cochise County, there is ongoing international legislative dialogue to restrict the ephedrine and pseudoephedrine production around the world, since there are only nine such production plants in the world, Rheinheimer said.

Rules to prevent those plants from producing more of the chemical than is needed for the legitimate uses would make it tougher to produce meth in “super labs” — which exist in places such as Mexico and fuel the local meth-importing trade, Rheinheimer said.

That would make more relevant rules implemented last year in states such as Arizona that are designed to restrict over-the-counter sales of ephedrine-based products to prevent illicit use, Rheinheimer said.

“Arizona young people use meth at twice the national average,” Goddard added.

And at least 65 percent of all child neglect and abuse cases in Arizona are meth related, as are most fraud crimes and most property crimes, they agreed.

Another issue is street gangs, which Sierra Vista and other parts of the state have seen more activity from. This can include violent crime or graffiti.

During an interview with the Herald/Review on Tuesday afternoon, Goddard talked about the changing face of street gang-related crime in the age of the Internet.

“Ironically, gangs today are less territorial,” he said.

That is, they, too, have joined in with online criminal community to become “very involved in the financial culture,” Goddard said.

In regards to the Internet, the attorney general said his office does the best it can with the staff it has.

There are two prosecutors/investigators of online crimes at the Attorney General's Office, and there is a push for at least eight more cyber investigators at his office, Goddard said.

With limited resources, the Attorney General's Office must be choosy in what online fraud cases it prosecutes, Goddard said.

Within the online crime genre comes trafficking of child pornography, and online law enforcement is ever growing as a part of police work.

Goddard said the Attorney General's Office is "not bashful about publicizing it, when we get someone with a long sentence," as is often the case with child porn or child luring convictions.

"And that's, I think, a deterrent for even the most virulent pedophile," he said.

Resources

The following resources are among those available for crime and fraud prevention in Southeastern Arizona:

- Arizona Attorney General's Office has satellite office hours at the Sierra Vista Public Library from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. the second and fourth Wednesdays and Thursdays each month.
- U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords' Sierra Vista office offers contacts for assistance by federal agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission, at 459-3115.
- Southeastern Arizona Governments Organization offers crime and fraud prevention help for families and senior citizens.
- The Better Business Bureau of Sierra Vista advised people to check with them before using a service, to vet the legitimacy and reputation of the business.
- The American Association of Retired Persons offers document and junk mail shredding parties, to prevent criminals from obtaining loose paperwork with personal information for identity theft.
- Southern Arizona Legal Aid offers free legal consultation and advice for those who are financially or otherwise disenfranchised from the legal system.